

EVANGELIUM

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i. Introduction

This tract inaugurates what we envision as a quarterly series devoted to the earliest eras of Christianity – Jesus’s life and ministry (ca. 5 BCE to 33 CE), the generations of the Apostolic (ca. 33-150 CE) and Pre-Nicene (ca. 150-325 CE) Fathers, and the gnosticisms of the 2ND, 3RD, and 4TH centuries. Other ideas, conversations, and materials – the faith from the Council of Nicæa to the East-West Schism (325-1054 CE), the mysticisms of the 5TH and later centuries, pre-Rabbinic (pre-70 CE) Judaism, etc. – are also sure to find their way into any given number.

We hope to reach fellow Christians (and others who have an interest) with a combination of [a] excerpts from lesser-known texts, especially paracanonical and apologetic works, [b] useful factual information, [c] the latest findings from historians, archæologists, and textual critics, and [d] meditations on primitive ‘catholic’ (i.e. universal Christian) tenets and doctrines. We encourage readers to participate in the conversation and offer suggestions or other feedback by visiting AD ASTRA PER ASPERA, our online home on Tumblr.

Peace and blessings be with you and yours. May your lives be filled with light.

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ii. FROM On Faith, Part IV

— By Melito, Bishop of Sardis (d. ca. 180 CE):

[...] our Lord Jesus Christ [...] is the perfect Reason, the Word of God: who was begotten before the light, who was Creator together with

the Father, who was the fashioner of man, who was all things in all, who among the patriarchs was Patriarch, who in the law was Law, among the priests Chief-priest, among the kings Governor, among the prophets Prophet; among the angels Archangel, and among voices the Word, among spirits the Spirit, in the Father the Son, in God God, the King for ever and ever. For this is He who was pilot to Noah, who conducted Abraham, who was bound with Isaac, who was in exile with Jacob, who was sold with Joseph, who was captain with Moses, who was divider of the inheritance with Joshua the son of Nun, who foretold His own sufferings in David and the prophets, who was incarnate in the Virgin, who was born at Bethlehem, who was wrapped in swaddling clothes in the manger, who was seen of the shepherds, who was glorified of the Angels, who was worshipped by the Magi, who was pointed out by John, who gathered together the Apostles, who preached the Kingdom, who healed the maimed, who gave light to the blind, who raised the dead, who appeared in the Temple, who was not believed on by the people, who was betrayed by Judas, who was laid hold on by the priests, who was condemned by Pilate, who was transfixed in the flesh, who was hanged on the tree, who was buried in the earth, who rose from the dead, who appeared to the Apostles, who ascended into heaven, who sitteth on the right hand of the Father, who is the rest of those that are departed, the recoverer of those that are lost, the light of those that are in darkness, the deliverer of those that are captives, the guide of those that have gone astray, the refuge of the afflicted, the Bridegroom of the Church, the Charioteer of the Cherubim, the Captain of the Angels, God who is of God, the Son who is of the Father, Jesus Christ, the King for ever and ever. Amen.

➤ Translated by J. B. Lightfoot in *Essays on the Work Entitled SUPERNATURAL RELIGION: Reprinted from THE CONTEMPORARY REVIEW*, 2e, NY: Macmillan, 1893, 232-33.

➤ Alternative translation available via CCEL.org (ANTE-NICENE FATHERS, Vol. 8) —

iii. *The Books of Ezra*

— For all of us who have difficulty keeping track when scholars refer to texts within the Ezra (Esdras) tradition:

1 Ezra = canonical Ezra = 1 Esdras (Lat & Slav) = 2 Esdras (Gk Esdras B'), cc. 1-10.

2 Ezra = canonical Nehemiah = 2 Esdras (Lat) = 2 Esdras (Gk Esdras B'), cc. 11-23.

3 Ezra AKA "Greek Esdras" = 1 Esdras (Gk Esdras A') = 2 Esdras (Slav) = 3 Esdras (Lat).

4 Ezra AKA "Latin Esdras" (or Jewish Apocalypse of ...) = 3 Esdras (Slav) = 4 Esdras (Lat), cc. 3-14 – *not* in the Gk OT.

5 Ezra = 4 Esdras (Lat), cc. 1-2 – *not* in the Gk or Slav OT.

6 Ezra = 4 Esdras (Lat), cc. 15-16 – *not* in the Gk or Slav OT.

Three Additional Texts/Versions of 4 Ezra —

- Apocalypse of Ezra (Gk) AKA Word & Revelation of Ezra
- Apocalypse of Sedrach (Gk) AKA Word of Sedrach
- Vision of Ezra (Gk/Lat)

iv. *The Authorized Version (AV/KJV) and Its Offspring, Part 1*

After a revision of the King James Version of the Bible was officially commissioned in 1870, debate over the need for (and desirability of) a new version grew heated, particularly in the United Kingdom and America. The revised (RV) Apocrypha of 1894 completed the British process, with American (Standard Edition ASV) versions of the Old and New Testaments finally arriving in 1901 and 1900, respectively.

Having just passed the 400TH anniversary of the AV/KJV in 2011, American Protestants, more than their British counterparts, are the ones who vigorously defend, against all others, the most literary of English Bibles – though they still seem divided over the Apocrypha's inclusion in the original editions. The translation was reworked for the New KJV, and the diction modernized for the 21ST-century KJV, but all in all, the current text varies little from the 1900-01 ASV – or, for that matter, from the AV's final fixing in 1769.

- Authorized (King James's) Version (AV) (KJV) – publ. 1611, std. text 1769.
- New King James Version (NKJV) – publ. 1979-82 (sans Apocrypha).
- 21ST-century King James Version (KJ21) – publ. 1994.

➤ *The Holy Bible*, AV Study Edition, including 400TH-anniversary Auxiliary Material and Commemorative Seal, NY: Am Bible Soc, 2011.

In tribute to one of the greatest monuments of the English language, we offer two hyperlinks – the first to a complete *high-resolution* scan of an original 1611 KJV Bible; the second to a scan of a smaller facsimile edition from 1911 (the 300TH anniversary).

☛ 1611 AV Bible: < tinyurl.com/AV1611KJV >

☛ 1911 facsimile: < tinyurl.com/1611fac >

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v. Primitive Christianity, Part 1

For modern, and especially secular, readers, the word *primitive* can seem entirely pejorative, calling to mind ignorance, superstition, crudeness, etc. When scholars and theologians discuss primitive (Lat *primitivus*, 'first, earliest') Christianity, however, they mean only to emphasize the *earliness* of the concepts, teachings, and texts in question. Of course, the most vigorous critics of Christianity take no little pleasure in latching on to the idea that the faith was (and is) nothing more than 'primitive' superstition – as if *modern* superstition would somehow be more acceptable!

We want to kick off our first essay series by considering the concepts, doctrines (i.e. teachings), and tenets (i.e. foundational beliefs) that derive directly from the earliest periods of Christian history – Jesus's ministry (ca. 31-33 CE) as well as the era of the Apostolic Fathers (ca. 33-150 CE). If nothing else, a detailed survey provides secure (and common) ground for further inquiries, statements of fact and of faith, and most important, conversations among believers and non-believers alike.

Even the most skeptical scholars date the entirety of the New Testament (NT) to ca. 150 CE, with more conservative estimates placing all 27 books before 100 or even mid-70 CE. Apostolic writings outside the NT – Barnabas, 1 Clement, the Martyrdom of Polycarp, etc. – take us to ca. 150 CE and the close of the apostolic period. All of which means our access to the earliest years of the faith is quite good, particularly compared

with what we know of other people and events from the same period in history.

The goal of this series is to review the relevant texts and oral traditions from that time to determine the doctrines and tenets that *defined* early Christianity. Additional details can certainly be had from later authorities, but the Christian faith as we know it (i.e. what grew out of Jesus's initial ministry) had fixed its core identity within three generations of the Crucifixion.

As noted, in addition to the canonical NT, we have a substantial number of witnesses from the period ca. 31-150 CE. The Apostolic Fathers are represented by

- Apology (of Quadratus) [fragment]
- Didache (AKA Teaching of the Twelve Apostles)*
- Epistle of Barnabas*
- Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians
- Epistle to Diognetus (from Mathetes)
- Epistles of Ignatius – to Polycarp, the Ephesians, Magnesians, Philadelphians, Romans, Smyrnæans, and Trallians
- Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord (by Papias) [fragments]
- 1 Clement* & 2 Clement
- Martyrdom of Polycarp
- Relics of the Elders (as quoted by Irenæus) [fragments]
- Shepherd of Hermas*

* Quoted as scripture or named by one or more early Christian authorities.

Outside that circle, among the earliest apologetic, gnostic, and anonymous writings are

- Apocalypse of Peter (Akhmim)*
- Apocryphon of James
- Apocryphon of John

- Apology (of Aristides)
- Basilides, Works of [fragments]
- Book of Elchasai [fragments]
- Dialogue of the Savior
- Disputation of Jason and Papiscus (by Aristo) [fragments]
- Epistle of Mara bar-Serapion
- Epistle of the Apostles (AKA Epistula Apostolorum)
- Epistle to Flora (from Ptolemy)
- Gospel of Judas
- Gospel of Mary
- Gospel of Peter*
- Gospel of the Ebionites [fragments]
- Gospel of the Egyptians [fragments]*
- Gospel of the Hebrews [fragments]*
- Gospel of the Nazoreans [fragments]
- Gospel of the Savior
- Gospel of Thomas*
- Gospel of Truth*
- Infancy Gospel of Thomas
- Isidore, Works of [fragments]
- Marcion, Works of [fragments]
- Naassene Psalm [fragment]
- Odes of Solomon
- On Righteousness (by Epiphaneus) [fragment]
- Preaching of Peter (AKA Kerygma Petri) [fragments]*
- Protevangelium of James
- Ptolemy, Works of [fragment]
- 2ND Apocalypse of James
- Sophia of Jesus Christ [redaction of Eugnostos the Blessed]
- Sibylline Oracles, Books 1-2, 6-8 & 11-14 [largely redactions]
- Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs [redaction]
- Traditions of Matthias (AKA Gospel of ...) [fragments]*
- Trimorphic Protennoia
- Valentinus, Works of [fragments]

* Quoted as scripture or named by one or more early Christian authorities.

The second list could be extended further, and not everything named will figure directly into our analysis, but the sheer number of texts illustrates how productive Christian writers were during the dozen decades after Jesus's death. Either way, such diversity means that detailing the faith as it was conceived and practiced prior to 150 CE is not the same as reiterating the orthodox faith of the 4TH and later centuries. Indeed, whether we accept the authority of any text beyond the 27 books of the NT, there is no simple way to reconcile the differences in detail and emphasis among the Evangelists as compared with Paul, for example, or of Paul with the authors of 2 Peter and Jude.

Harvey Goodwin, a former Bishop of Carlisle, once posited that "Scripture contains the history of revelation" (*Modern Scepticism*, NY: Christ Evid Soc, 1871, 239), and many, if not most, current Christians would agree. Yet his claim begs a crucial question: *Is that unfolding history univocal and entirely consistent each step of the way?* The facts – what we know about the textual history of the apostolic writings and what each of them actually says – reveal that there never has been a univocal or entirely consistent presentation of the faith, even if we exclude both paracanonical texts and the earliest Church Fathers.

Our challenge, then, is to accept what we find and to do our best to understand *all* of it as it is.

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